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DEMOCRACY AND THE RESCUE OF FRENCH CULTURE

BY ALLAN BALL

FRANCE has been called a nation of doctrinaires. That may be the reason why they quarrel so well in France. And when, as at present, they are quarreling over a "crisis" which is fairly reducible to the compound problem of whether and why they are losing the very genius for "clarity" which enables them to do it so well, the controversy, even if it be not blazoned in large letters upon the bill-boards, is well worth other people's turning aside to see.

Few of us need to be reminded that "what Paris thinks to-day France will think to-morrow and the world the day after." Yet no one seems to be on record with an explicit proposition to leave any particular problem to France to settle for the rest of mankind—nugatory allusions to the sartorial pre-eminence of the *rue de la Paix* notwithstanding. But if any one nation were to be delegated by mutual consent of all the others to consider and determine for the world what educational material is best suited to turn a crude human being into a cultivated one—more particularly speaking, to settle the humanistic controversy and, incidentally, whether culture is really worth while—France might well be the nation delegated.

The crisis in French educational methods of to-day is not, indeed, simply a phase of the classical controversy, though it is substantially that. It is part of the broad problem of efforts to adapt education to changing conditions of life. And everywhere, of course, the classical controversy has its varied complications, sometimes locally accidental, sometimes intimately significant. The advantage of France is that there, even if sometimes these seem momentarily distracting, they nevertheless in the larger view help to focus

attention upon the real significance of the main issue. We, for instance, allow ourselves to fumble with the word "culture" till for very vagueness it wrongs the phariseism of the original Pharisees—who at least stood for something definite—and sheer boredom almost puts the word culture out of court. In France *la culture française* has a perfectly definite reference to the arts of expression in the vernacular of the country. We need not here go into the fundamentals of the question why a dead language is so excellently useful an instrument for securing a mastery of those arts of expression. But the fact that that mastery is the most important thing that one may hope to get in school at all is at the bottom of the whole matter.

Those aspects of the French discussion, moreover, which seem superficially farthest afield, are really not distractions, but efforts to root the educational problem in the great underlying social movement of our day. It is this which, in a France anxious with the questions of modern radicalism and shocked and depressed by its occasional excesses, gives an almost romantic interest, by a strange paradox, to the classical controversy. So we see, in one of the most widely discussed books of last year, an attempt to show that what one would assume to be the very citadel of French culture, the Faculty of Letters at the Sorbonne, is intrenching itself against the very spirit of culture. And a few months later there is organized a league *Pour la culture française*, headed by a famous man of letters, supported by a mighty array of great names, including those of nearly the entire Academy and many others important in quite other ways, and while protesting, almost derisively, one would think, that it has no political significance whatever, aiming to force the undoing of educational "reforms" with which politics have at least had not a little to do.

Very serious changes have taken place in French educational methods during the past ten years, which have been obviously eventful years in French political life as well. They have seen the disestablishment of the Church. They have seen a progress in the social movement that has gone far toward disestablishing the *bourgeoisie*. And France would not be France, with a highly centralized educational system, and with a belief in the relation between education and life which has the courage of its logic, if these political events had not been related to the educational changes.

The quick connection between political ideas and the school-room received a curious illustration in the French Senate last summer, in an incidental discussion of anti-militarism, which is well known to have made no slight progress among French school-teachers. One day, during the excitement over the Franco-German Moroccan negotiations, one of the senators expressed the hope that the Minister of Public Instruction, who was present, would not discourage the " pacific " tendency in the instruction of children in the public schools. But a colleague gravely protested, " This is not the moment to enervate patriotism by *des theories pacifistes* " and was applauded by the entire Senate.

Even for that sinister form of anti-social destructiveness, *le sabotage*, the wanton brutality of the under dog, which seems to have been so ominously upon the increase in recent years (though the synthetic effect of its newly coined name upon the journalistic imagination may help to account for its extreme frequency in the newspapers), the ironic penetration of the political cartoonist has found a whimsical relation with the educational system. *Le Figaro*, not long ago, contained a sketch by Forain showing a couple of *saboteurs* laid up for the night and one of them remarking to the other, " I hear they are going to *decorate* the school-teacher who taught me to think."

The bitterness of the irony overlies the profound belief, irrelevant though the grim joke may seem, in the effective relationship between French schools and the propensities of French citizenship. And whatever the national traits which are behind the centralized system of administration, it is certainly one great effect of applying that system to education, that the problem of culture and utilitarianism is so consciously loaded as it is with the broader issue of democracy against political reactionism and clericalism.

Prior to 1902 the French secondary schools, the *lycées*, were strongly classical in their character; and the examinations which at the end of a student's course in the *lycée* were given by the university to pass him for the bachelor's degree consisted very largely of literary tests, especially of his ability to write well in his own language. The changes which have taken place since then have all been in the direction of " modern " training, toward early specialization, toward what is supposed to be an immediate equipment for

a special career. The difference, as usual, is not merely of the subjects studied; it is of the motive for studying them. In 1902, instead of the old substantially uniform classical course in the *lycées*, there were established four groups or "cycles," ranging from the full classical programme, through different combinations, to the fourth, which is wholly modern, all admitting equally to the examinations for the bachelor's degree. This change has been followed by others of related importance: the practical absorption in the Sorbonne of the *École Normale Supérieure*, the *reformé de la licence* in 1907, whereby the general examinations of a cultural character, especially in Latin and in French composition, were largely displaced by examinations concerning specialized research, and the decrees upon *les équivalences primaires* in the spring of 1910, by which certain of the higher grades in the primary system were accepted as qualifying for admission to the university. It should be remembered, by the way, that the French "secondary" system is not simply superimposed upon the primary system of schools, as with us, but diverges from it at a comparatively low grade, so that the upper grades of the primary system are in a sense parallel to the secondary, though with their utilitarian purposes they are very different in character.

Meanwhile, for several years there have been cumulating complaints that young Frenchmen presumably educated were losing their ability to use their native tongue with the old-time clearness and correctness, not to say elegance and distinction. A dozen years ago or more the complaint was of the intrusion of alien elements into the French vocabulary. But now the question is more radical. It is of the loss of that quality in writing which comes of clear and disciplined thinking, particularly the feeling for effective arrangement and a keen sense of the values of words. University examiners have reported this decadence in those who come up for degrees. Prominent men of affairs have deplored it in the young men beginning their professional careers. Frenchmen are intelligently quick to take a serious view of such things. Hence *la crise du français*; and the very word "crisis" has become a profession of faith or a timely jest—the bright young paragraphers are finding crises everywhere—according to one's point of view.

In the latter half of 1910 there appeared in *L'Opinion*,

over the Platonic signature of "Agathon," a series of articles calculated to focus all this conservative dissatisfaction. Early in 1911 they reappeared in Agathon's completed book, *The Spirit of the New Sorbonne* (*L'esprit de la nouvelle Sorbonne*), with the subtitle *La crise de la culture classique, la crise du français*.

The subtitle not only touched the susceptibilities of intellectual Frenchmen at a tender point; it offered the explanation, not new of course, but epigrammatically condensed, for that deterioration in the use of the instrument of thought which constitutes the crisis. The book is largely devoted to showing that the coincidence of the changes in education and of this deterioration is not accidental, and that the obvious remedy is a return to classical teaching as the best means of securing the results desired. The two great phases of opposition to classical education are effectively delineated in Agathon's analysis of the spirit of the "new" Sorbonne: sociological utilitarianism and the inundation of misapplied "scientific method"; and the latter is the trouble that he seems to feel most keenly. Agathon's complaint, be it noted, is not against science in its proper character. For the Faculty of Sciences he has no unpleasant words whatever. It is the Faculty of Letters that he is attacking, and the group of men whom he undisguisedly regards as an oligarchy within it whom he holds, representatively at least, responsible for the damage to French education.

The titles of his three leading chapters tell a plain tale: "The Sorbonne against classical culture," "the Sorbonne against philosophical culture," "the Sorbonne against secondary education." And the assault was so vigorous and so amply supported that answers of some sort had to be made. Dean Croiset himself, great Greek scholar though he is, and certainly not the particular object of attack, made on an official occasion, even before Agathon's articles had been republished as a book, an urbane reply belittling, so far as possible, the whole agitation over a crisis in French culture. But the defenses have been various. Some have simply denied the existence of a crisis. A radical Deputy in the Chamber not only asserted that the crisis does not exist, but tossed the charge of pure *snobisme* over into the camp of the humanists. More generally the modern "Sorbonists" have admitted and regretted the facts and

laid the blame upon the secondary school. This reply, however, had been fairly anticipated by Agathon's answer: the academic changes which have made it possible for a student to come up from the *lycées* to the baccalaureate in such an evil case are not the work of those who are engaged in secondary teaching, but are imposed upon them from above, thanks to political influence and the dominance of a few individuals in the Sorbonne itself.

The object of Agathon's most especial distaste is the ostentatious flaunting of pseudo-scientific methods in subjects to which scientific methods of the external sort have little or no natural application, *la superstition scientifique*, the craze for scientific methodology as a Procrustean scheme for all things educational, superseding the older ideal of a human being with a mind to be developed. Rather sardonically he observes how university teaching of literary subjects has been assimilated to the methods of laboratory practice in the physical sciences. A study-room, for instance, has become a "laboratory of French philology," a "workshop of scientific manipulations." Gathering and arranging, it would appear, are the typical scholarly processes. Philological investigation has become a matter largely of lists and statistics. Literary commentary is restricted to objective, external facts. Subjective interpretation of a text, to say nothing of "appreciation," is not only out of fashion; it is officially condemned. The word "practical" has become a touchstone, not indeed quite as in the American use of it as an all-embracing slang expression of the popular ideal, but to point the analogy of the processes of literary commentary to those of physical science.

The present school throws back the taunt of "dilettantism" and "rhetoric" at the older style of literary teaching. "Rhetoric" is the bad name for the academic dog. Of course the denunciation of rhetoric is itself a rhetorical device; moreover, the word has certain connotations in French educational technique which it has not to us; but one wonders whether the tables would not be a good deal turned about if the friends of the dog were to call him Applied Literary Psychology instead. He might be discovered to be quite in the fashion. And the plausible attempt to show an opposition between elegance, contemptuously credited to the old style, and precision, somewhat too confidently claimed for the new, is a fine mistake, for real ele-

gance and real precision are almost inseparable. The spectacle of a literary man sneering at rhetoric is only a little less unpleasant than that of a theologian sneering at theology.

But research is for facts, we are reminded, not for style; and research is coming to be the method and the end of all higher education. The aim of the teacher is to make his pupil a productive scholar—to make him a “producer,” in fact, before he is himself produced. Agathon has some biting paragraphs upon the relative value to the student himself of the external procedure of his “research work,” *ces besognes d’erudits vieillots*, and the studies of the students of a former day. Even for the claim that the method of historico-scientific research makes students industrious, real “workers” in the cause of knowledge, he is obdurate, and shows up the mechanical methods of the prevailing fashion, bibliographical compilation, classification of “cards,” and the like, as tending to produce a race of intellectual softlings. All this worship of the bibliography and passion for the card catalogue—*la manie des fiches*—he insists, favors a very illusory sort of industry after all, and calls for much less real mental exertion than the older educational processes: it is composition which is the really redoubtable task of the student, not the collection of facts; moreover, clear expression is the indispensable accompaniment of clear thinking. Scientific method has become an obsession in the modern academic mind. *Fetichisme, illusionisme scientifique*, are some of the lively terms with which Agathon diagnoses the case.

One may venture the guess that some part of the emotion behind Agathon’s attack is the reaction of sheer boredom at the wearisome reiteration of the gospel of research by its often half-fledged but devoted disciples. It was an American university president who characterized the student body in most of our graduate schools by the term “industrious mediocrity.” At any rate, one doubts sometimes whether all this unbreeched zeal for making contributions to the world’s store of knowledge does not actually leave a trail in the fields of scholarship analogous to that of the young rural trespasser who tramples the tall grass in a meadow before the real haymaker the more angrily takes up his task. Boredom with this sort of scientific earnestness on the part of those whom Max Nordau not long since ruthlessly

classified as *les demi-talents* is, no doubt, somewhat a symptom of the intellectual *boulevardier* and tends possibly to weaken the seriousness of the attack. But the boredom of the Boulevards is, after all, a useful sign, perhaps, when things have gone far enough in a particular direction.

Another note for the *boulevardier*, and an odd variety of distraction from the real educational issue, is the appeal to French nationalism against the influence of the German seminary. "It is the imitation of Germany which has obsessed us," says Agathon in his preface, and denunciation of the intellectual influence of the victory of 1870 is one of the points of departure for his book. Scientific methodology as against "literature," specialized "research" as against subjective culture, are not necessarily inconsistent with a high degree of attention to classical philology; the performances of German scholarship are evidence enough. But the traditional French conception of classical study has been something quite different; in fact, classicism and philology are clearly contrasted things in the French mind; and the opposition has derived a peculiar piquancy for French patriotism from the fact that research, as it has latterly assumed predominance in the Faculty of Letters at the Sorbonne, is so distinctly of the type from beyond the Rhine. "Does such a system of education conform to the special qualities of our race?" demands Agathon as the dominant question. Such criticisms as we in this country are accustomed to see when the rampant newspaper editor falls upon the methods of producing doctors of philosophy, take in France an added zest from the German associations of all that sort of training. Moreover, there has latterly seemed to be some tendency in Germany itself to react from dry *minutiæ* and carelessness of style toward general ideas and that attention to artistic presentation which have been so characteristic of French scholarship. M. Emile Faguet, writing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* more than a year ago, remarked upon it as a good thing that each nation has been trying to correct its tendency to excess in one direction by exerting itself in the other. But Agathon and his allies deplore the signs that Frenchmen are throwing away the birthright of their special national genius just at the moment when the Germans are trying to take it up.

The logical objectionableness of such a national *argumentum ad hominem* is certainly palliated by the intrusion

of politics on the other side of the controversy. No doubt in any such warfare it is humanly natural to try to link with the adversary's cause as much of adventitious offense as possible. It seems, at any rate, an additional complication for the humanistic controversy that in republican and secular France institutions of the Catholic Church are counted prominently among the defenders of classical education; and clericalism is familiarly linked with political reactionism of other varieties.

But the serious reasons which have given the anti-classical propaganda in France its claim to association with political radicalism are sociological and utilitarian. The utilitarian motive seems to press harder and harder everywhere, but in France especially what one may venture to call the theory of the practical has been very significantly interwoven with the whole question of modern democracy. There is splendid allurements in the conception of a vast variety of educational opportunities in the school system of a nation, offering to every class in society whatever it may need to equip or enrich its life. And there is a pretty parallel in the theory of a democracy of studies, with no superior pretensions for any educational subject whatever, a theory that not only has its analogue in politics: it actually has been made a political issue in the debates of the French Parliament. Democracy there has taken hold of educational problems, and demagoguery perhaps must have its fling.

Educational demagoguery in educational circles themselves would seem to be a fair interpretation of Agathon's complaint against them. The worship of numbers, which is a familiar reproach upon university administration, can be euphemistically explained as the effort to make the university meet the wants of society—to suit the supply to the demand. The results in terms of popularity being encouraging, the tendency appears as a most plausible utilitarianism with reference to the university itself. Its relation to the broader phases of utilitarianism in society as a whole is an obviously large share of the present problem.

The theory of secondary education in France—which leads to the bachelor's degree—has been that it was a training of the mind, not technical nor vocational, but preparatory to either of these. Plainly the leisure and the money to spend upon this enrichment of life and opportunity belong to a social class above the lowest. Hence the opposition, since

the entire educational system is under political control, to this privileged part of it by the radical democrat against the *bourgeois*. With the aim of making its graduate a cultivated person, the *lycée* has proceeded, consistently until within recent years, upon the theory that certain subjects of study were especially well adapted to secure this result. In point of fact they had attained this position of eminence by inheritance—or by evolution, according as one chooses to put it—rather than by contemporary competition. This is undeniable, and of course it is enough to account for many black looks from the apostles of the latest and the popular. So the claims of these subjects to an aristocratic pre-eminence has been contested. Since the reforms of 1902 the tendency in French collegiate education has been more and more toward an “equality of sanction” among programmes, the analogue of democracy. The net result has been to place subjects of quite various educational effectiveness upon a practical equality in educational standing.

With this the case, it is very obvious that in the present state of the popular mind the “modern” studies have decided advantages in attractiveness to the greater number. In the first place, they are professedly “up to date,” and whatever this may mean in particular cases up-to-dateness is a word to conjure with. Their utility, though it may in fact be potential, rather than actual, is plain and on the surface instead of intangible and subtle. It seems apparent to the crudest parental mind. Moreover, they are generally easier, measured in actual mental effort: hence a part of their allurements to the youth immediately involved. And there is vast popular reverence for the word *science*. Anything called by that name claims and gets the sanction of the real religion of to-day. But naturally the crude public has not a clear notion of what scientific processes are. Naturally the name tends to go with the more external aspects of the thing. The plain acquisition of facts—information—is a bulky element in the prevalent idea. And the element of presumed commercial utility is rarely far in the background when the question of scientific popular education is to the fore. The transformation of the French *lycées* has been described by M. Alfred Fouillée very summarily: the primary system has invaded the secondary system *sous le nom trompeur d'enseignement moderne*.

The ideal of social adaptation has largely superseded the

old ideal of the perfecting of the individual mind and character. One may regret this change of ideal, fancying that the individual is, after all, the necessary unit out of whose kind the community has to be formed. But Professor Durkheim, who speaks for sociology at the Sorbonne, is quoted as cheerfully dispensing with him thus: "The individual being disposed of . . . there remains only society." No doubt it is upon doctrine like this, the "mysticism of the new school," that the defense of primary specialization must rest. The meaning of life to the individual being ignored, the utility of the individual to society is solely to be considered, though even for this it is evidently a begged question whether the individual will attain his normal utility to society if he is trained only for his special work.

The French partisans of that modern training which is presumed to adapt men better and more immediately to their functions in society have fallen, in their attitude toward classical education, upon a curious political inconsistency. Democracy in education requires—Professor Gustave Lanson, for instance, insists very well—that the secondary system of instruction should be free, as the primary system and higher education already are. But then, he continues, the *lycées* should receive the wider clientele of lower average social status with "appropriate" educational programmes. That means utilitarian training for immediate application to the students' work after their schooling is done. In other words, secondary education, to be democratic, with an equal chance and a fair show for everybody, must be put upon a level that will appeal to the immediate wants of the greater number; and higher education, accordingly, must be put upon a similar rough-and-ready basis so far as its prerequisites are concerned. The old-time classical training obviously does not meet these requirements.

Meanwhile "the question of the Latin" having got into politics, the upholders of classical culture must be conciliated, too. On one occasion M. Steeg, the Minister of Public Instruction, spoke of the classics as quite too high and fine for most of the students, and to be reserved for the education of the best minds among the rising generation of an intellectual aristocracy—a view in somewhat comical contrast to that offered for proletarian satisfaction, and also to the related presumption that all studies are democratically equal among themselves.

The practical motive in the whole affair seems to be the desire of those who do not want to take the course of study that should make them intellectual aristocrats, nevertheless to secure eligibility to all the material prospects and professional privileges to which the more rigorous course of study used to be prerequisite. The appeal of this desire is an obvious invitation to political interference with educational programmes. If we may trust the critics, the methods that have been coming to prevail are directly calculated for the upholding of mediocrity and against the ripening of individual talent. Hence again, and in spite of occasional consoling words from the ministry of public instruction, the old issue between democracy and the élite.

Meanwhile, to the claim of superior practical efficiency for the "modern" type of schooling there is no lack of skeptical replies. Those that bear the hall-mark of university circles, such as have not assumed the cheerful rôle of popular leadership by adroitly taking a seat upon the top of the popular wave, are of course subject to the discount that is always charged upon the reactionary. But there is even a journalistic validity in such a protest as the now famous letter of M. Guillaïn, head of the steel industry in France, to the Minister of Public Instruction in November, 1910, urging the restoration of that preliminary classical training which would make young engineers and technical specialists able to express themselves in effective and intelligible reports, and otherwise, as he said, qualify them for a broader outlook upon their work.

Early last summer these various movements of discontent with the recent tendencies in French education condensed themselves in a definite organization for the effective urging of a counter reform. About the beginning of June there appeared in the public press, over the distinguished signature of Jean Richepin, a "manifesto" reviewing the series of injurious reforms in French education which have been referred to, by which, as he said, "the unity and the integrity of our system of studies have been definitely compromised," calling attention to the observed damage in the intellectual qualifications of the rising generation and inviting concerted action "for the defense of French culture."

His appeal attracted immediate adherence, and not many days had passed before the new *Ligue pour la culture française* had figured in the educational debates of the French

Parliament. Early in July M. Richepin wrote in further explanation of the idea:

"The League for the defense of French culture is born of the crisis of the methods which have little by little disorganized and overthrown our national education. Secondary classical education, what was once called the humanities, had no other object but to give the intelligence a general preparation, apart from all professional specialization. . . . The soil that is to be sown ought to be prepared. The more deeply it is tilled the richer will be the crop. To-day we content ourselves with sowing on the surface."

After amplifying this theme with reference to the recent programmes he continued:

"Such are some of the facts to which our League will call the attention of the public. The defense of the humanities, of the study of Latin and Greek, the re-establishment of classical secondary education in its unity and in its spirit, such will be the particular direction of our action."

In his original manifesto M. Richepin had urged the patriotic importance to France of maintaining its solidarity with the past, with that "Mediterranean civilization" of which France is so direct an heir. Opponents like M. Georges Batault, who appeared as a protagonist of the other side with a long article in the *Mercure de France* last year, have no use for this continuity. As a radical exponent of the new industrialism M. Batault seeks to link the cause of the classical humanities with all the decadent tendencies, alleged or actual, in the France of the present day. But there is no true antagonism, insists M. Richepin, between the humanities and either scientific culture or "modern society, which, lest it turn to demogogy, requires an intellectual élite. . . . It is, then, apart from all spirit of party that one can attach himself to the cause of the humanities." And in the very concluding words of his proposal he finds it expedient to reiterate that it is "without the slightest political color or motive."

This is a precaution which the atmosphere of the classical controversy as we are familiar with it in this country does not as yet require. The assertion must reflect more of desire on M. Richepin's part than of confidence, for the political radicals find it a useful appeal to their gallery to make this a party question. In a sense the purposes of the League are non-political. Its recent publication* of an admirable demonstration of the educational utility of the

* *Les Sciences et les Humanités.*

classic languages by the distinguished mathematician, Henri Poincaré, is an evidence of what it aims to do. It seeks to form public opinion.

But public opinion expresses itself politically, more obviously so in France than anywhere else. And changes in French educational programmes have practically to be brought about through the action of a minister who is the representative of a political group. French legislators find educational matters quite too interesting for them to keep their hands from. The legislator, moreover, whatever be his actual limitations, professedly represents society at large; and he is not, as a rule, an educational expert. When the budget of public instruction comes up for debate a Deputy or Senator is generally on hand to renew the familiar assault.

It is too early yet to foresee what may be the result of the efforts of the League for the defense of French culture. There are some grounds for fearing that the ruling powers of the democracy are inclined to be a little deaf to the arguments of the élite. It is conceivable that democracy should simply be making a gross mistake. We have seen politicians nearer home inveighing against a college education and all that that suggests, but here it is obviously claptrap, or at worst a mere manifestation of feeling; there this sort of thing may rise to the baneful dignity of a public policy. And the more impatient defenders of the classics are in some danger of assuming that tone of futility which is a familiar reaction against triumphant overweening crudeness. But whatever be the outcome, the constant insistence upon education as a direct national enterprise, the enthusiastic intention to make it representative of the nation's latest ideals, coupled with the paradoxical peril, in the very center of cosmopolitan influences, of that provincialism of up-to-date-ness which is so characteristic of our time, make France at present the most interesting battle-field of the humanistic controversy. Or to revert to our earlier fancy, it is the alembic in which we may soon see indications of the color of the future.

ALLAN BALL.